A HAPPY NEW YEAR

BOSTON
GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET
1895

SERMONS

OF

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It is proposed to continue the publication, under this title, of pamphlets by Mr. Clarke

PRICE: Single copies 5 cents each, or three dollars per hundred.

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"In the multitude of my thoughts within me, thy comforts delight my soul." — PSALM xciv., 19.

WE have wished each other "A Merry Christmas": we now wish each other "A Happy New Year." Merriment is good for a while, but it does not last long. It belongs to a brief period, like Christmas. But happiness may extend through the whole year, and that is why we wish merriment for Christmas and happiness for the new year.

It is not enough, however, to *wish* each other a happy new year: if we can, we should help each other to *make* it happy. And I will offer a few suggestions this morning as to how we can make the new year a happy one for ourselves and others.

Let us, first of all, remember that, while pleasure comes from without, happiness comes from within. Pleasure is a stimulus sent to excite and arouse the faculties,— good and useful, not to be despised. The Lord has filled life with various pleasures,— pleasures for the eye and ear, the imagination and affection. Pleasant are the sights and sounds of nature,— the sweet breath of morn, the glorious approach of the sun, the charm of the songs of birds proclaiming that their life is joyous. Pleasant is the activity of a new day, coming full of hope; pleasant the calm approach of evening, and the repose of night. Pleasant the meeting with friends, the excitement of intelligent conversation, the atmosphere of friendship, the delicacy of fine culture. All these give pleasure, but not happiness. All such excitement is transient, and meant to be so. It is not food for the soul. Surround yourself with all possible pleasures, and,

if there is emptiness within, they give no satisfaction. Consider the case of a man like Byron,— noble, born rich, endowed with the most original genius, surrounded by admiration and affection, all the pleasures of life within his reach, all worldly ambitions open to him, and he himself the most dissatisfied man in Europe, driven into exile by the furies of his own wilful and stubborn choice; he himself just what he called Rousseau,— "a self-torturing sophist," "an apostle of affliction." Read the Book of Ecclesiastes, and find there the utter misery of a king who had fed his heart on all the pleasures and triumphs of the world, and ended by thinking death better than life, and better than both never to have been born. And, on the other hand, consider Milton, sitting in blindness, poverty, fallen on evil days and tongues, compassed round with darkness and dangers,— instead of the book of knowledge of nature's works, only a universal blank,— but with a diviner light shining in his soul than any of which mortal thought could dream. Consider that English statesman of our own day, Fawcett, also blind, but orator, teacher of men, and leader of thought; who was able, as Postmaster-General, to put new vigor into the British Post-office; able, on the floor of the House of Commons, to answer from an unfailing memory, and with perfect accuracy, questions as to dates, numbers, and details of business. These are men of genius; but who that has visited the homes of the poor, the bedside of the incurable sufferer, but has been struck with the serenity, the peace, the satisfaction, which so often causes us who came to give comfort to receive more than we were able to give?

As I sit near my study window, of a summer day, I often look with pleasure at a tall and graceful birch-tree, whose light foliage dances in the sunlight as gayly as do the little birds which flit around it. Yesterday, while writing this sermon, I looked up, and saw it bent down with a weight of frost, but with a new charm, an added grace, and a more ethereal beauty.

So have I also seen some dear friend, who seemed only fitted for happy fortune, stripped by the wintry blast, and bending under a load of disaster, but with a more heavenly content and a nobler joy flowing from within than ever before. All this teaches us how true is the scripture which tells us that "out of the heart are the issues of life," and how wise the poet who reminds us that

> "We receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does nature live.
> And would we aught behold of higher worth,
> Then from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the earth:
> We may not hope from outward forms to win
> The passion and the life whose fountains are within."

This is, therefore, the first thing to remember, if we wish for a happy year: that pleasure, which comes from without, is evanescent; but happiness, which comes from within, is permanent. Not what we have, but what we are, is the one thing needful. From our own life, being, character, flows true happiness into the heart. "In the multitude of thoughts within me, God's comforts delight my soul."

The next suggestion I make is this: pleasures come from transient and successive impulses, happiness flows in a continuous stream. What shall give this continuity to our life? We need some steady purpose, in order not to be swept away by the constant distractions of every day. We ought not to be tossed here and there by the waves of circumstance; not to drift with every chance current, but to steer in a fixed direction. This gives real content. We owe a great deal to daily work; and, if we are not compelled to work, we should seek some regular work to do. Then we have the sense of accomplishment, of going forward, finishing something. Discontent largely comes from not putting ourselves to some

steady business, in which we can make progress. Besides the necessary work of every day, it is well to have a plan or useful purpose,— something to do which we are not compelled to do, outside of the mere routine of life. We see little children with some such object, making a collection of seals or stamps or autographs. That is better than having to say, "What shall I do?" It gives a certain continuity even to a child's life, and these little enterprises should be encouraged.

A higher object than this is to have some permanent study, which shall give unity to the year; the pursuit of some art or science to which we feel ourselves attracted. Select something, — botany, geology, the study of the habits of birds or animals. Take a period of history, and make it an object to find out all that can be known in regard to it. Every such study widens and opens as we advance. It leads us to higher elevations, to the survey of a broader horizon. It is a spell, drawing us on to new vistas of thought and insight. We begin anywhere, and go everywhere. A man who has some special study, it hardly matters what, has that much purpose in his life. He is saved from desultory thought, develops powers of accurate observation. He has a thread of unity in this pursuit, which is itself an education of the will, giving concentration, grasp, and persistent determination of character.

One special advantage of such a study is that it takes us out of ourselves, while the pursuit of pleasure ends in self. To put ourselves resolutely into some pursuit outside of mere enjoyment is a check to egotism, and enlarges the soul. This, also, helps to make a happy new year.

The planet on which we live is, as we know, moved by two antagonistic forces,— the centripetal and the centrifugal forces, — one pulling it inward to the centre, the other driving it outward. If one of these forces acted exclusively, the planet would drop into the sun, and be lost there: if the other acted exclusively, it would fly off into outer darkness and emptiness. So

the soul of man is made to revolve in the orbit of human life by the action of two similar polar forces,— one drawing him inward on self, the other taking him out of self, and interesting him in what is outside,— in nature, truth, society, country, mankind. Both motives are necessary, and each must regulate the other.

Some persons tell us that a desire for personal happiness is the only motive in the human soul; that, if we care for others, it is because we find that this increases our own happiness. It is either selfishness pure and simple, or selfishness in disguise, which moves us all and moves us always. They quote Pope: —

> "O happiness! our being's end and aim;
> Good, pleasure, ease, content, whate'er thy name;
> That something still which prompts th' eternal sigh,
> For which we bear to live or dare to die."

But no! It is not true that man is only moved by a desire for happiness, or that he has self always in mind. We do not find happiness thus, by looking for it or seeking it. It comes to us when we are thinking of other things, when we forget ourselves in other persons, other lives or industries, which take us away from ourselves. We must be interested in these for their sake, not for our own, in order to find joy in them. Self-seeking takes us out of sympathy with men and things. By itself alone, it would end in utter stagnation of mind and heart, in loneliness of soul and moral death. On the other hand, to have no personal purpose, no self-direction, no independent aim in life, to be wholly at the mercy of outside interests, to be hurried out of ourselves by external influences,— this would end in the loss of individual character, personal conviction, and independent purpose. Every soul is a unit in the sight of God; every soul is a seed to be unfolded according to its own law, to grow up in all things into what God meant it to be. God has made each one of us for some special purpose, great or small; something that *we* must do, and no other. To one he gives

five talents, to another two, and to another one; but each is to use and improve his talent.

This year, then, let us each endeavor to grow,—to grow according to the law of our own being; to be ourselves, and no one else; to be our best selves, and so to find out our own strength and weakness. Let us be true to ourselves, be faithful to the light God gives us; not be moulded by fashion, but stand on our own feet,—this gives every one some strength, some power to do good. In order to give, we must have. In order to help others, we must be something ourselves.

And then, having something of our own, let us give. Let the life which God sends to our own mind and heart go forth freely to find other minds and hearts. Do good, hoping for nothing again, satisfied that it is blessing enough to be able to bless others, and that it is more blessed to give than to receive. What a happy new year it will be to us, if its hours, as they come and go, find us not minding our own good solely, but also the good and joy of others! Let us educate ourselves to think of what others need, of what will sweeten life to them. Let us acquire those habits of kindly action and kindly speech, that aroma of good will which sends joy and strength into other hearts. This care for the happiness of others, this thought of what they need, will be returned to us, full measure, pressed down and running over.

There is a great deal of sympathy in the world, but it needs to be directed by good sense. There is a great deal of good feeling, but it needs to be guided. Impulses of good nature are not enough. The habit we all want is to think of others, to remember them, to put ourselves in their place by an effort of imagination. This is what helps others the most, and for which they are the most grateful. To put ourselves by their side, to enter thoughtfully and patiently into their situation,—this is what is wanted.

"Not what we give, but what we share;
For the gift without the giver is bare."

We must take interest in persons as well as in masses, in individuals as well as in classes. When we talk about the laboring classes or the criminal classes or the suffering classes, we put them away from ourselves. Therefore, study each man as a person, with personal qualities, needs, wants; study each one lovingly, as a child of God, meant by God for a special end. We study the organization of a plant or an insect with awe, seeing the great creative power therein. How much more shall we look with wonder on that strange, complex phenomenon, a human soul? What depths, what possibilities of good and evil, what unexhausted powers! Outwardly, men seem commonplace, their lives trivial. But put yourself into real relations with any human being, and you are entering the temple of the Most High. I stand in the solemn cathedral, with its multitude of chapels, its soaring columns, its interlacing arches, its gorgeous windows, its gloom and glory. Awe falls on my soul as I remember the prayers, the anthems, the aspirations, which have gone up in this place to God. But a higher fear and awe falls on us when we witness the struggles of a human soul. Then we say, "One stands here greater than the temple." "This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven." There is nothing so interesting to man as man. That is why we read novels, forgetting that no such romances were ever invented as exist by our side in human lives. This will be a happy year if we learn in it to find a new interest in our fellow-men.

But, for such a work, we need a higher inspiration than that of human genius. We must be led by the spirit. What a peace comes to us, when we realize that there is such an inspiration always waiting for us; that we need only to consent to be led, and we shall have given us what to think and say and do! Then we are ready for all occasions, then no duty is too hard; for we have a well of water within the soul perpetually flowing,— a guidance and influence sufficient for all things.

Let us remember that we are never asked to do a duty but that power will be given us with which to do it. This year let us grow in grace; let us lean more and more on this inward inspiration; let us be sure that this comfort, this light, this guidance, this strength and peace, may always be ours.

The past year has brought many joys and sorrows. It has taken from us dear and noble friends. It has given us great opportunities. It has brought to us the beauties of nature, the delights of friendship, the glories of an ideal world, the inspirations from on high, the movements of human history, the progress of mankind. Let us be grateful for all, and trust in God for the future.

These pamphlets are sent by the Church of the Disciples, Boston. Any one who wishes for more reading of the same kind is invited to write to

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Corner West Brookline St. and Warren Avenue.

Boston, Mass.